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ABSTRACT

The superintendent of a suburban Seattle school district discusses four of the positive implications of declining school enrollments. First, the school enrollment trend is known. Second, there are going to be empty classrooms, which means that special programs that were slighted when facilities were crowded can now be adequately housed. Third, the need for outstanding leadership and planning may lead to creative approaches to meeting the district's needs. Fourth, and most important, declining enrollments can provide opportunities for things to happen that might otherwise never come about--in school programs, in community activities, in housing for groups that are financially burdened, and in community involvement in the schools. (Author/IRT)

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SPEAKER: Dr. Robert D. Sealey, Superintendent, Highline School District No. 401, Seattle, Washington

TOPIC: Declining Enrollments: Implications

PLACE: Room E-301-2, Convention Center

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PROGRAM: Page 93

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DECLINING ENROLLMENTS - IMPLICATIONS

It is truly a pleasure for me to be here and to have been asked to speak on the subject of declining enrollment. I am sure this subject is of extreme interest and concern to all of us, particularly as we look to the future and attempt to address ourselves to the rapidly changing enrollment patterns that are occurring in our schools. Today I should take a moment to let you know that I am not an expert in the field of declining enrollment, nor do I believe there are any as yet. I think that I may have been asked to speak on this subject because in the school district where I am superintendent, we are trying to do something positive in light of what is obviously on the horizon.

In order to help you establish the basis from which I speak, let me take a couple of minutes to tell you a little of my background and a little about the Highline School District. I, like so many of you, was fortunate to have entered education at a time when the "baby boom" was about to explode and the increasing enrollment was by far the biggest concern of educators, shared by the communities faced with the problems of building the buildings to house the children. Many educational opportunities presented themselves as new schools were being built and new positions created. During the past 25 years I have been part of the exciting and challenging period of growth and innovation unequaled in previous educational history. I, like so many others, witnessed the growth of a school district from a small, only recently consolidated district, surrounded by farm land, to the typical middle class "suburbia" that was created following World War II in which our school district became the fourth largest in the State of Washington, with the peak enrollment of 31,000 students in 1967-68.

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The Highline School District is located to the south of the City of Seattle, bordering on its city limits, with Puget Sound on our western boundary. The total population of our district is approximately 110,000 people. One unique aspect of the district is the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, which is located in the center of our district.

You may wonder what all this has to do with declining enrollment, but bear with me while I set the scene. In a recent survey by the Educational Research Service, they

found that the greatest degree of declining enrollment now exists in the major cities. The second largest area of declining enrollment is located in suburban districts with enrollments of 25,000 or more students. The City of Seattle could attest to these statistics as the City school system has experienced a decline of from 96,800 students in 1968 to 68,000 students this year; a decline of over 25% in 7 years. The Highline District supports the second half of that statistical statement as we have witnessed the suburban decline of over 20%. Even though declining enrollment may be recognized to a greater degree in the cities and large suburbs at the present time, it is a problem that must be recognized by school administrators in school districts throughout the country, regardless of the size or location. It is rapidly becoming a fact of life.

Let me address myself now to the specific title assigned to me in this presentation - - "Declining Enrollment - Implications". I am sure there are many implications that come to your mind, as it did mine when I first started looking at this problem. The first were those that were somewhat negative as we started immediately identifying the kinds of major problems and crises which can come to exist if we don't deal with the problem in a positive and constructive way. The first and probably most disconcerting is the immediate picture of closing and boarding up a building. Then, how will the community react? Next, what about staff; will the teachers raise hell and add to the confusion. And what about the school board; will they bite the bullet when the time comes and stick with you through the trauma of indignant citizen revolts as schools are identified?

These are all real concerns, and no superintendent with half a peptic ulcer can escape the realization that at least some of these concerns may very well come true. But let me quickly mention some of the positive implications that I see occurring in the declining enrollment era that we are presently moving into.

First of all, we know that it is not going to get any better or reverse itself, at least not while most of us are still in the game. With that as a given, then a second implication, and an obvious one, is that we are going to have empty classrooms, more available space, than can economically be utilized by the school district, and we are going to have pressure to do something about it. A third implication is that it will take outstanding leadership and planning to deal with the problem in a constructive way. This leadership can be generated only from the superintendent. And a fourth implication, which I think is most important, would be that declining enrollment can provide opportunities for things to happen that we thought might never come about - - in school programs, in community activities, in housing for groups most financially burdened.

There are other implications which declining enrollment will hold in store for us. As one continues to examine the effects, additional, more tangible problems present themselves. Someone suggested to me, one of the most disconcerting is that there will be greater superintendent turn-over. I guess that's an implication that goes along with just about any problem that occurs in education today! Greater difficulty in financing education is sure to be another, whether by tax

overrides, budget approvals, special levies, bond issues, or whatever you happen to be faced with that requires voter approval. Greater community division and conflict and greater pressures from special interest groups, particularly if in your planning you are faced with the problem of closing a school. Staff morale is certainly a concern that must be considered because declining enrollment does mean decreasing staff numbers. Teacher negotiations - - R.I.F. policies (or reduction in force policies) - - class size policies - - transfer policies - - all must be dealt with and no more are we going to be able to deal with problems of this nature without a great deal of help from the teacher associations. Reassignment and demotion, in some cases, of administrators in the school district. Early retirement as a potential avenue for some relief in dealing with the decline in staff as a result of declining enrollment. Well, these are only some of the many implications that I think the problem of declining enrollment holds for all of us.

I am sure that most of us turn to the literature as the first step when faced with a problem that is somewhat difficult. Let me take just a moment to mention a few of the materials and publications available to assist each of us in dealing with this problem. I am not going to attempt to go through all of the literature available on this subject, other than to say that there is much more becoming available virtually by the month.

The first is the May, 1974, publication entitled "Fewer Pupils/Surplus Space" - a report from Educational Facilities Laboratories, New York City. This publication provides a good historical summary and guidelines for dealing with declining enrollment.

Two others, and both to be credited to our own AASA organization, include a film strip and tape titled "Dwindling Enrollments and School Closing", and a second, a handbook for school administrators titled "Declining Enrollment: What to Do". This handbook is exceptionally well devised in that it not only identifies the problem, but addresses itself to related or spin-off problems which may occur, as well as provides a school closure timeline chart that could assist any district in its long range planning.

Let me go back now to the comments I made a few minutes ago about implications - - good and bad. Let me start with the good. First, what are the projections for enrollments. Why are these changes occurring, and how can you project this for your own district. I think the first question can be answered by looking at two types of statistics. One, the actual enrollment figures in schools throughout the nation over the past several years, and second, by looking at the birth rate that is presently occurring throughout the country. The total enrollment in the K - 12 schools for 1964 in the United States was 47,015,000. This increase continued through each following year, with a slight percentage increase until 1971, in which the peak enrollment of nearly 52 million (51,953,000) students were in the schools. 1971 became the turn-around year, with over a million fewer students

in 1972 (50,546,000) than in 1971, and in 1973 (49,890,000) again a reduction of nearly a million (656,000) more students. The projections are that this trend will continue through at least 1980, with well over 2 million fewer students in the schools in 1980 than are there today.

A second aspect that can be shown in looking at the national statistics, is that of grade levels. It is obvious in looking at these statistics that the decline in enrollment is presently affecting the elementary schools, with little affect at the secondary level. Virtually all of the decline is registered at the elementary level, coming after 1970.

Secondary schools have continued to grow and will not actually feel the effects of the declining enrollment for another year, but then we will see both elementary and secondary declining together for the next several years.

As we look at national statistics on the U. S. birth rate, we find that a record low in the number of births per 1,000 women of child-bearing age occurred last year, exceeding the lowest point in our history of 75.8 children per 1,000 women which occurred in 1936 at the height of the depression in this country. The peak in the number of babies born was in 1957, when 123 babies per 1,000 women were born in this country. As you can see, this has declined to a figure of 67 babies in 1973.

There was a slight turn-around in 1974 with an increase of 3.3 over the previous year. This may, in fact, be reflecting the leveling off that is about to occur, or it may be just a slight fluctuation in the continued downward trend.

I won't go into a great deal of detail on why this is occurring because I think it is fairly obvious to everyone. The development of birth control pills, the social acceptance and legalization of abortions, the environmentalists' concern and pressure for zero population growth, and the economy itself in a downward turn, have all influenced this trend.

Looking at national statistics actually does little for realizing the effects at the local level until we convert this into the real world of your own school district. Using my own as an example of the effects of the declining enrollment, it is obvious where the growth took place and when we reached the point of turn-around in this population trend.

In our district we actually beat the national figures by a couple of years, in that 1967 was our peak enrollment with 31,000 children. We have now declined to a figure of 24,000 today, and we project a continuation of this trend to a figure of approximately 17,000 in 1984.

Another pattern in local districts, which also reflects the national trend, is that the elementary schools are the ones that have nearly the total decline, whereas

the junior high schools are just now starting to feel some effects of the declining enrollment. Senior high schools are actually continuing on the upward trend and will for another three or four years.

The causes of declining enrollment are not totally that of fewer babies being born, however. In most school districts that are located adjacent to a large city, or the city systems themselves, the changing residential patterns, as well as other geographic and demographic changes that are occurring also affect the enrollment.

I mentioned that we have an airport in the center of our school district and it, like most airports, is expanding. This accounts for fewer homes and thus, fewer children. Other school districts have been affected by such things as expanded freeway systems and large shopping centers which may take up some of the space previously occupied by homes.

Changing residential patterns are also a factor that each school district must deal with. Apartment houses are springing up in areas previously zoned for single residential, and condominiums are becoming common in many of the more desirable places to live. Another change that can sometimes be overlooked is what has been called the "empty nest" syndrome. Many of the homes located in pleasant, attractive, and more affluent neighborhoods are continuing to be lived in by parents who have raised their children and are now comfortable to continue living there alone. This is particularly true in the inflationary economy which now exists. As interest rates continue to go up and the price of homes skyrocket, there is less and less desire to sell and relocate in another home. These are some of the factors that must be considered as one assesses his own school district in relationship to projected trends.

The second implication I mentioned earlier, and which most obviously follows, is that most school districts are going to be effected by a declining enrollment and with it, empty classroom space. Again, I view this as a very positive factor. When the baby boom occurred in the fifties and sixties, schools were going up by the thousands and most were built with limited financing. The objective was to get a roof over the heads of the ever increasing number of children entering the schools. Few of these schools were actually built to meet the total physical needs of programs then, or for the many new programs that have been added. An example would be the special services now provided youngsters at the elementary schools, such as counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses. We have all added a great number of programs through special education, alternative education classes, cross-age teaching and special reading programs. School districts now have the opportunity to use empty classrooms, as they become available, for housing these special programs in a setting much more comfortable than previously existed.

Elementary school libraries, or resource centers, are now becoming standard. Art and woodshop areas in an elementary school can be provided. Music rooms and reading centers also lend themselves extremely well to utilization of classroom space that becomes available. These, and many others, are examples of alternative uses of classroom space that are not only desirable, they are highly educational.

Now, let me mention the third implication - - that of the need for leadership and planning. I mentioned that this leadership can come only from the superintendent of a school district. However, this does not mean that the superintendent has to be personally involved in all of the planning for declining enrollment any more than he must be totally in charge of any other of the specific programs which exist.

When a school district was facing an increasing enrollment of 3 to 5% per year, projected over several years, there was no question about the justification for hiring, or assigning, the responsibility for planning and supervision of facility construction to a specific administrator. There is every bit as much, if not more, justification for doing the same when faced with a decline of 3 to 5 percent per year over an extended time. In fact, the problems of declining enrollment can be even greater than increasing enrollment, and the need for expertise in this area should not be diminished for a moment. Most superintendents have backgrounds in facility planning building design and such, but only those who have gone through a period of declining enrollment can truly show credentials for this kind of training, and most can show you the scars that went with it! When you see it coming, get someone assigned to the problem and let them gain the expertise to deal with it in a truly well-organized management way.

That leads me to my next point, which is the involvement of community. Again, speaking from a personal base, when I realized the turn-around that was occurring in the enrollment patterns in our school district, I asked my school board to allow me to bring in a consultant firm to give us the assistance necessary in addressing ourselves to the problem. I had hoped someone could ride in on a white horse, draw up a nice neat package, and present it to us, thus allowing us to place the blame on them as we went to the community and started implementing it. However, our school board took a different position, having had previous experience with outside consultants - - they said, use your own administrative staff, involve the community, and do the job yourself. This was, in fact, a very good decision. We now have an on-going, active, and understanding group of citizens that we continue to utilize as we deal with the problem.

I'll get back to this in a few minutes, but first let me mention briefly another implication of declining enrollment which can have a positive or negative result - - that of community use of facilities. I said initially that availability of space in the schools can open new vistas in community use. Let me expand on that.

Because of the limited space available for children in our schools throughout our previous history in education, we have always been rather stingy in sharing facilities with other community groups. I think this pattern is changing and must change in order to maintain good community involvement in the schools. There are many ways in which schools are now being utilized by community groups. One way is through Community Schools Programs in the evening for adults, as well as children. Many of you are familiar with the Flint, Michigan, program and other programs which have grown from the concept of providing space in schools for community adult use.

Another alternative use is that of community centers - - art, music and drama, are areas of importance to the total health of a community, and often very little space is available to those who desire to participate in these cultural activities. Empty classrooms can very well provide for these activities and build another solid base for school support with a public often difficult to reach. Other uses would include such compatible activities as daycare centers, senior citizen centers, and governmental centers in which many of the government services can be provided in the neighborhood atmospheres. These include water districts, sewer districts, licensing divisions, military recruitment, food stamp services, welfare and employment services. All of these can fit into the space available as declining enrollment affects the schools.

Now let me go back to the comment I made about community involvement and community input because I think basically, without it the superintendent, his administrative staff, and board, will have difficulty surviving as we face the problems of declining enrollment.

One area where citizen understanding is of prime importance is in the area of school finance. Unfortunately, a school district's budget does not decline in direct proportion to the decline of the enrollment. Also, inflationary costs are increasing faster than any offset we might realize from enrollment decline. We have had from 10 to 15 percent increase in inflation in almost every category during the past year. There have been salary increases for employees, and state support throughout the nation has not begun to keep pace. There are other costs that are very slow to change. Transportation is a good example. It doesn't cost any less to put 50 students on a bus than it costs to put 70 students on a bus. So until you can reduce entire bus runs, you will not make a great deal of savings in transportation. The same thing is true in food services, where it doesn't cost a great deal more to make 130 lunches than it does to make 100. It doesn't cost any more for a custodian to sweep a room that has 23 students in it than one that has 30 students in it. It still takes 18 minutes. So the slow decline of enrollment does not affect savings in the food services operation, and in the maintenance and operations area.

Now let me turn to the establishment of the Task Force for Declining Enrollment. When the school board directed that a staff-citizens Task Force be formed to in-

vestigate and prepare recommendations for dealing with declining enrollment, they suggested that the make up of the group be as broad based as possible. The Task Force was then established, made up of parents, students, teachers, and administrators. The purposes were outlined for the committee, which included the planning of the process for developing community awareness, understanding and input; establishing criteria for identifying schools where changes may be considered; and to prioritize alternatives for the use of classroom space.

A timeline was established and sub-committees were formed as needed. It was determined that this would be done in as rapid a fashion as possible, so you will note that the beginning time was April 1 with the final report to the school board due July 1, just three months later.

About the time our staff was completing the final draft of this Task Force report, we received the Educational Facilities Laboratory publication, Fewer Pupils, Surplus Space. In that publication it was stated that there must be a plan when considering the implications of declining enrollment. This plan must include five basic steps: that a school district have a set of agreed upon goals, they must work from a factual base, there must be an analysis of factual data, they should establish a set of possible solutions, and there should be choices among alternatives. These five steps were exactly the steps taken by the Highline Task Force.

The first step stated there must be a set of agreed upon goals. The Goals for Education for the Highline District were the result of a year-long re-evaluation of previous Highline District goals. This study was completed in the fall of 1972 and involved a survey in which 9,000 community people responded. Each of the four major goals for education now have specific objectives developed through teacher participation.

The second step involved working from a factual base. Again, the Highline District had already prepared a Master Plan in 1971. In this Master Plan is an attempt to identify major program directions and subsequent facility needs in the Highline District during the ten-year period 1971-81. The Master Plan, which was updated in November of 1973, contains specific information about schools, their location, their capacity and adequacy. This plan also contains enrollment projections for each school and cost data relating to needed construction of the school district's facilities.

The next three steps, which included analysis of factual data, establishing a set of possible solutions, and providing choices among alternatives, were done by the Declining Enrollment Task Force. The Task Force first established the criteria to be used for facility evaluation and listed them specifically for investigation. A set of weightings, or points, were established so that a matrix could be developed once each of these areas of consideration had been investigated. First, educational adequacy was the primary concern as the committee

approached their problem. They answered questions that were directly related to the programs available, as well as space needed for those programs. They looked at operating costs, determining which costs would transfer to another school if pupils were to change schools, and which costs could be eliminated if the building were closed or used for an alternative use. Enrollment, of course, was a major concern. Looking at present enrollment, space available, availability of adding students to a building, as well as projected enrollments. They assessed the decline of enrollment by schools and areas of the district.

They looked at the impact of the airport, its expansion and its affect upon the housing surrounding the airport, as well as projected and existing freeways dividing the district. The Task Force then addressed themselves to the problem of alternative uses of schools, again, with weightings attached to assist in determining the best and most logical use of school facilities. If schools were to be used for other than educational purposes, what was its structual availability for remodeling and redesign - - and what was the capacity of each of the neighboring schools, based upon an average of 25 students per classroom, and their adequacy as receiving schools. In addition, the safety of students in the location that they would be attending school - - the walking patterns, and other factors which might influence the health and safety of youngsters was evaluated.

The final product of this exercise was a matrix of weighted points, based upon specific criteria, which could serve as a truly factual base for informing the community of differences between buildings when the proper time came. The total points from this matrix also allowed the district to list schools in rank order for further consideration for alternative uses.

After much discussion and input from other community people, the Task Force established a list of desirable uses of excess school space. They included in priority order, fulfilling additional educational needs, meeting community needs, allowing private or commercial uses, and the last in the priority, redeveloping the site. Specific uses for educational purposes that were identified by the Task Force included special education, federal programs, as well as supplementary teaching areas. Special education in our state has become a major concern to many of us, and the legislature only last year passed a law requiring total educational opportunities through the public schools for all handicapped students, ages 3 through 20, regardless of their handicaps. Obviously, this has had an impacting affect upon use of facilities to house youngsters who are multiply handicapped.

Community uses that were identified included, in priority again, youth related services, educational related services, governmental offices, and citizens services. Private or commercial use of school facilities was the final area of consideration, and included rental to various business or industrial organizations who might find some use of a school.

We asked the Task Force to do one additional thing for us, and that was to identify the concern of the community as it would relate to declining enrollment. It was interesting to note, but with little surprise, that finances appear to be one of the most important aspects in the minds of most people serving on the Task Force, as it was rated as the first concern. Relocation of students and quality of education itself, appeared to be second most important in the consideration of this group, among the 13 specifically identified concerns that they used in their rank order.

The final report of the Task Force on Declining Enrollment was presented to the board with recommendations for implementation to be made in four phases. The first phase, to increase the general public awareness and understanding of declining enrollment. This we have been doing through 78 public meetings, as well as written articles in newspapers and school publications. During this phase a questionnaire was used to seek input from those attending these meetings and through this cross reference with the public, the Task Force list of community concerns proved to be almost totally accurate. The questionnaire revealed that quality of education ranked higher than finances in the public view.

The second phase was to offer opportunities for the public to express opinions, make suggestions, and ask questions. This is the feedback aspect of this four phase process, and again, is accomplished through meetings throughout the community, asking the public their feelings and attitudes, as well as their desire for the use of facilities. The community was also given a promise that the staff would return to again meet with them if their school was to be considered further for some alternative use.

The third phase includes the input directly to the school board for them to weigh and analyze before making the final decisions for alternative use of school space. And the fourth phase is that of keeping the community informed of the decisions when they are made and while they are being carried out. Basically, keeping a constant communication link with the public.

In ending this presentation, I guess the question that was with us from the beginning, and I am sure still exists, is where do we go from here. This school-community process of dealing with the problems of declining enrollment cannot be formulated into one simple package. It is a process that must be continued as we analyze data, keeping the community informed, exploring different options that are available, and hoping that the community understands and is receptive to educational and cost saving alternative uses that are developed. Although dealing with the problem of declining enrollment is certainly a challenge, it is one that I believe can be capitalized on to accomplish much in education that has not been possible before.

As I mentioned earlier, there are at the present, few experts in this area of growing concern for school administrators. But like most major problems confronting ad-

ministrators today, one way of learning is by sharing another's experience, mistakes, and solutions. As Cyril Sargent concludes in an article on the subject of declining enrollment, "No two human situations are ever alike. Our knowledge systems and our ways of doing things are based, in large measures, on finding similarities, making categories, and using these commonalities to determine our actions. We tend to search for likenesses and rely on them as the basis for decisions. We need, however, constantly to remember the uniqueness of events, actors, and situations, and to search out these 'uniquenesses" as well as similarities".

I will be most happy to share with you the final report of our Declining Enrollment Task Force Report if you think it can be of some help to you. Write to us in our school district for a copy.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to share with you this information today.

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